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## COLONIES AND TRADE.

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No. I.

### TEA FROM ASSAM.

THE Chairman of the East India Company having sent to the Society a sample of tea made in Assam, from the leaves of the tea-plant which has recently been found growing wild in the forests of that country, the same was referred for examination to the Committee of Colonies and Trade.

In the year 1788, Sir Joseph Banks suggested to the Court of Directors of the East India Company the practicability of cultivating the tea-plant in British India, particularly among the mountains that bound the Rohillcund territory. It was not, however, till 1834 that the subject was submitted to the Council by Lord W. Bentinck, then governor-general. A committee was in consequence appointed for the purpose of obtaining the necessary preliminary information with respect to the soils and situations most favourable to the growth of the tea-plant. The committee deputed their secretary to China, in order to ascertain there the nature of the soil in which the tea-plant is cultivated, to procure seeds and live plants, and to engage the services of some Chinese cultivators and

preparers of tea for sale. All these objects were, in a certain degree, carried into effect.

It was found that the plantations of the tea-plant are raised chiefly from seed, and that it flourishes best in a light, yellow, loamy soil, at the bottoms of the hills, well watered, and occasionally subject to floods, in a temperature inclining rather to warm than cool, and chiefly between the twenty-eighth and thirty-second degrees of north latitude. It is associated with the orange, lemon, ginger, sugar-cane, bamboo, and rice.

In 1835, information arrived at Calcutta that the tea-plant had been found indigenous in some districts in Upper Assam, both within and without the British boundary. On receipt of this interesting intelligence, a deputation was appointed, consisting of Dr. Wallich, Mr. M'Clellan, and Mr. Griffiths, for the purpose of investigating on the spot the botanical characters and natural history of the tea-plant, especially in comparison with that cultivated by the Chinese. The deputation, on its arrival in Assam, was joined by Mr. Bruce, who, to his other qualifications, added that of an acquaintance with the Assamese language.

The tea district of Upper Assam lies chiefly between 27° and 28° N. lat. in the valley of the Brahmapontra and its tributary streams. The tea-plant varies in stature between that of an ordinary shrub and a small tree. It does not grow in continuous woods, but in patches of no great extent, among the damp jungles, often associated with the bamboo, and, in general, in places liable to be flooded by the tropical rains. The people of the Sing-pho country are acquainted with the plant, and make use of its leaves; but prepare them in a different and ruder manner than is practised in China.

It does not appear that any plantations of tea have been made by these people, the whole of their supply being got from the wild plant.

There seems to be no difficulty in forming plantations of indigenous tea in Upper Assam to any required extent, by partially clearing a suitable woody district, and sowing the seeds or planting cuttings; but whether such tea will be equal to the Chinese remains to be proved. The tea of China is raised from seed, and therefore has a continual tendency to approach the original type, the wild plant; just as out of any number of apple-pips the greater number would produce mere crabs. If, therefore, the Chinese gather the seed indiscriminately, and plant out the seedlings indiscriminately, there will be but little difference between the wild and the cultivated tea; but if they select the seed from plants having particular qualities, and reject those plants raised from such seed, which resemble the wild original, the cultivated plant may, in a long course of years, differ greatly from the wild one in many of those characters on which the most valued qualities of teas depend. The sample before the Committee seems to have got wet, and to have been re-dried.

Mr. Gibbs stated that he has tasted and minutely examined the tea imported from Assam by the East India Company. He considers it to be of superior quality, and from the same plant as the Chinese tea. In general appearance, it resembles a mixture of flowery Pekoe and Pekoe kind, except that the blossom has a somewhat coarser appearance and harsher feel; it is also without the redish ripe leaves which distinguish the latter, and appears to have been over-heated in the curing. The colour of the infusion of Assam tea is of a deep, rich red;

the flavour is pungent, resembling high-burnt Pekoe, but destitute of the fragrance, or aroma, which China tea of first quality possesses. Considered as a first attempt, the defects are of but little consequence, and capable of being soon overcome.

Mr. Twining.—The sample is not a very good one, probably from having been fired too much. Though this Assam tea is an article of considerable promise, yet in its present state it is very strong, and requires to be improved by culture, and by a better mode of preparing the leaf. The high firing to which it has been subjected, has affected the flavour so as to render it difficult to say how far it may be capable of taking the place of the finer China teas.

Mr. Hunter.—The sample has been re-dried, and has a coarse, strong flavour in consequence, but seems capable of great improvement.

Mr. Kinton.—The sample is a strong, powerful tea, but overheated.

Mr. Wilcox.—The sample has a pungent flavour, stronger than that of any genuine China tea. The flavour, however, whatever it might have been, is much injured by overheating.

Mr. Thompson.—The present sample is probably of the first shoots of the tree, and resembles Pekoe. It therefore has more strength than older leaves, and being of Pekoe kind, it is not likely that much of such quality can be obtained; because the proportion of Pekoe annually received from China is only as one to forty-five or more, compared to congo, souchong, and other black teas. From the present sample, it may be expected that teas, fit for general use, may be obtained from the district which has furnished this.